

## JOHN KEATS'S SENSUOUS IMAGERY IN "WHEN I HAVE FEARS THAT I MAY CEASE TO BE"

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**Abstract:** *When I have fears that I may cease to be*, by John Keats, portrays the poet's fear of dying young and being unable to fulfill his ideal as a writer and loses his beloved. Based on the use of sensuous imagery, it is clear that visual image dominates the use of imagery and there are two major thought groups: 1) Keats expresses his fear of dying young (lines 1-12); he fears that he will not fulfill himself as a writer (lines 1-8) and that he will lose his beloved (lines 9-12); 2) Keats resolves his fears by asserting the unimportance of love and fame in the concluding two and a half lines.

**Key words:** visual image, organic image, kinesthetic image, fear, death, love and fame.

Keats was born in 1795. He was one of the most important figures of early nineteenth-century Romanticism. Many of the ideas and themes that can be seen in Keats's great works are essentially Romantic concerns: the beauty of nature, the relation between imagination and creativity, and the response of the passions to beauty and suffering. The theme of this poem revolves around the poet's fear of death that might put a sudden end to his enjoyment of books and life generally. The spread tone of the poem is the tone of fear.

The poet tells about his fear of meeting death that may stop or part him away from his books. He says that this fear always comes to him and he

always feels that he is close to death. He does not worry about the people around him or even cares about the joys of life but he only worries about not being able to achieve his writings and ideas before he dies. That is what makes him worry the most. He worries that death may come to him before he makes a huge harvest of philosophical books and ideas. The poet tells that this fear makes him pessimistic all the time.

When he sees the clouds in the sky, he thinks that death is close to him and his worry and fear begin to increase. Though, he says, that these clouds are symbols of romanticism, they frighten him so much. The poet also tells that his fear of losing his beloved if death approaches him. He says that he feels that he will never be able to see her beautiful face. He finally says that he will lose both love and fame, because both will disappear in the air by the pass of time. In some ways, the writer treats the poem as a discourse since Fowler (1980: 80) says that viewing literature as discourse produces some unusual insights.

Complexity often happens in the process of analysis, especially when it comes to the nature of the language of literature. As Brooks (1975: 3) says, the language of poetry is the language of paradox. It is not common language. Dillon (1980: 213) also warns that some poets frequently employ inversions and deletions. Fortunately, Posner (1982: 18) emphasizes that it is not a big problem. He clarifies that every word is an independent conceptual word and, as such, able to transmit an idea, every word has (at least) one constant meaning which, when combined with the meanings of other words, contributes to the meaning of the expression as a whole. This study proceeds based on the views.

## **METHOD**

This study applies The New Criticism mechanism. This approach uses close reading to analyze works of literature. Pioneers of this school of analysis are T. S. Eliot, Kenneth Burke, J. C. Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, and Yvor Winters. In a different term, Reinhart (1980: 92) calls it as focus-interpretation (to distinguish it from vehicle-interpretation). In a way some complicated words were found, the words, then, tested against ordinary usage (Canfield, 1997: 6). Through this mechanism, a comprehensive discussion is hopefully achieved.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Keats's sonnet follows the Shakespearean model, using the same English form and dramatizing a series of agonizing thoughts that focus the mind. The form resembles that of many Shakespearean sonnets, in which the poet framed his discourse through "when" and "then" clauses.

The poem is divided into sections of four lines each. They begin with "When," "When," "And when" respectively. The last section ends in the middle of the fourth line. The final section is two lines and a bit. Each section expresses a particular sentiment. In the first section Keats uses organic image "fears" but this is not of death or pain or terror but of regret. In lines 1 and 2, he regrets no time to write down his thoughts. In lines 1, 3 and 4, he regrets no time to write lots of books full of great ideas. In the second section he contemplates images, dreams and the subject matter he will not now be able to translate into poems. In the third section he says he will never more see his beloved girl friend.

These first three sections deal with things that he will no longer be able to do. In the final section he tells what he will be able to do. He sees himself able to clearly contemplate the universe and able to do so until he finally fades away and dies. By reading line 1 and then jumping forward to read this last section readers will encompass what he can do. Below is the poem.

*John Keats* (1795-1821)

When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be

1817

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
 Before high-pilèd books, in charact'ry,  
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face, 5  
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
 And think that I may never live to trace  
 Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;  
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
 That I shall never look upon thee more, 10  
 Never have relish in the fairy power  
 Of unreflecting love—then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

(Kennedy, X. J. and Gioia, Dana, 2005: 504)

“When I have fears that I may cease to be” addresses the philosophical concept in three ways. First, Keats expresses concerns that death might prematurely take away his art and his longing for the fame of being an accomplished poet. Second, he worries that death might interrupt his quest for man’s existence. This concern for the absolute, universal and God can be identified with the Romantic poets. Keats’s ability to use this philosophy in his poetry allows the readers to see nature, imagination and reality in a different perspective. Skilleas (2001: 129) emphasizes that literature is usually philosophical.

Third, he fears that death will come before he has achieved the transcendent experience of love without worries. The final lines are a synthesis of the problem in a way that precariously avoids despair. Keats’s fears turn to thoughts that both “fame” and “love” are doomed in the end to “nothingness.” The three organic images indicate a close relation among them, at least they show respective occurrences. His final fear, which is the fate of “high romance” or man’s soul remains unresolved in the poem. One gets a sense of the beautiful but sublime as Keats contemplates that which is most dear to him perishing.

Based on his family’s sufferings from dreaded disease, he reflected on the possibility that art, by uniting truth and beauty in a single sublime experience, might possess the power to overcome the world of pain and death. This would redeem man’s doubts and uncertainties through spiritual transcendence. By identifying completely with an experience, the poet goes beyond the rational meaning of his own existence, thus doubts and fears could be overcome. As a Romantic poet Keats identified with human emotions within. This unconscious level of awareness enabled one to reach a full appreciation and acceptance of emotion.

Fear is an emotion in the poem and an integral part of experience. The identification of fear, or facing it directly, may help one to overcome it. Thus, the greatest fears, such as death, may become revealed or faced through the intense thinking that accompanies writing a poem. This is the unconscious level that is the creative force in humans as explored by the Romantic poets such as Keats. The following is the discussion per quatrain, especially the use of sensuous imagery throughout the poem.

### First Quatrain

In the first quatrain, the speaker expresses his consternation that he might die before he has had a chance to do all of the writing he wants to do. He has a "teeming brain" full of ideas, images, and thoughts that he hopes to write about and fill books. He wants to write so many books that they will be piled high.

He wants his books to be filled with mature writing that fills out characters and that examines his thoughts and ideas and presents them ready for public consumption. He metaphorically compares his ideas to "grain" that is harvested and held in huge silos. The visual image "grain" strengthens the impression of his great talent on writing. On the other side, through the construction of the "when" clause, he asserts that at times he has fears that he will not be able to accomplish his desired writing goals.

He shows fear of unexpected death which would deprive him of chance to express all the ideas he has in his mind. He has been collecting them through whole life and it is extremely important to fulfill himself as a writer.

The quatrain emphasizes both how fertile his imagination is and how much he has to express; hence the imagery of the harvest, e.g., "glean'd," "garners," "full ripen'd grain." Subtly reinforcing this idea is the alliteration of the key words "glean'd," "garners," and "grain," as well as the repetition of *r* sounds in "charact'ry," "rich," "garners," "ripen'd," and "grain." A harvest is, obviously, fulfillment in time, the culmination which yields a valued product, as reflected in the grain being "full ripen'd." Abundance is also apparent in the adjectives "high-piled" and "rich." The harvest metaphor contains a paradox (paradox is a characteristic of Keats's poetry and thought): Keats is both the field of grain (his imagination is like the grain to be harvested) and he is the harvester (writer of poetry).

There is a central metaphor in the quatrain, as there is a comparison between writing poetry and harvesting grain. The visual image "pen" is compared to a tool for harvesting grain "Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain." Books are compared to the buildings as "garners" where grain is held. This metaphor in these first four lines expresses the poet's first concern that death will cut short his poetic career. As the natural course of life is youth, adulthood and old age, so the growing of grain follows the natural progression of the seasons. For the poet to die young would eliminate his chance of "harvesting" the fruits of his mind, which will become "ripen'd" only as a poet ages. These fruits which are his poetic works, grant the poet fame as in line 3, "Before high-piled books, in cha-

ract'ry". Here, Keats uses beautiful visual images in making readers realize the transitory, that nothing is permanent.

"When I have fears" is such a powerful opening. Fear causes him to wonder, and he takes the time to write what some things are that he may never finish. One may wonder how some people come to fame; why some become iconic and others are never brought to the public's attention. Keats enjoyed a level of fame while he was alive, and even with his "fears," in the time allotted to him on earth, he managed to pen words that people still enjoy today. There are lines that stand independently in their scope and beauty, and others that create moments of introspection.

### **Second Quatrain**

Again, the speaker continues with another "when" clause that features further things that he fears he will miss, if he dies too young. When he sees the vast array of stars shining and contrasting with the backdrop of the black sky, he admires beauty of nature which inspires, creates and stirs romantic feelings. The visual image "Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance" confirms he could perfectly alter it to poetry with larger meanings he perceives beneath the appearance of nature or physical phenomena. He sees the world as full of material he could transform into poetry.

And he feels consternation that he may not be able to "trace/ Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance" (his is "the magic hand"). Through a combination of kinesthetic and visual image he wants to be able to determine the meaning of the stars: that they appear so easily if by mere happenstance, he wants to be able to contemplate, study, and write about the romantic possibilities.

Some believe that in this second quatrain Keats continues to discuss the fear that death will cut his life short. "High romance" would symbolize the night clouds in an almost literal concept as the poet will never live to "trace" or realize the night's sky. This would also be characteristic of the Romantic poets in the belief that recalling such images elevated the imagination. Another reading which is more closely related to Keats's philosophical ideas at the time, suggest that "high romance" is really referring to the truth of the universe. It is the age old question, "What is man?" By living Keats expresses his hope to one day be able to answer this question. Here the romantic concept of man's relationship to the universe is clearly addressed. However, this will depend on the "magic hand of chance" or fate. In essence, these lines are an attempt to examine his fear of dying before his soul reaches its destiny.

### Third Quatrain

In the third quatrain (lines 9-12), he turns to love. The speaker examines his feeling regarding his possible premature failure to complete a true romantic, love relationship. It speaks of another kind of "high romance," that of "unreflecting love." This also addresses the romantic idealism of how does one realize a relationship? In lines 9-12, the poet first addresses his beloved in typically romantic terms as in "fair creature." As the "fair creature of an hour," his beloved is short-lived just as, by implication, love is. Yet, the quatrain's main concern really is not his beloved. Instead, it is himself. Life is fleeting and his love is only "of an hour." Love is more emotion than thought because he expresses it by using kinesthetic image "I feel." It also has the power to transform the world.

He turns inward in realizing that he may never be able to have more than what he has already experienced. He contemplates a love without the concerns of time and death is like that of a "fairy power" because in mythology fairies are immortal, or "unreflecting" on time and death. Keats fears that he will never experience this kind of love. The quatrain itself parallels the idea of little time, in being only three and a half lines, rather than the usual four lines of a Shakespearean sonnet; the effect of this compression or shortening is of a slight speeding-up of time. Is love as important as, less important than, or more important than poetry for Keats in this poem? Does the fact that he devotes fewer lines to love than to poetry suggest anything about their relative importance to him?

The poet's concern with time (not enough time to fulfill his poetic gift and love) is supported by the repetition of "when" at the beginning of each quatrain and by the shortening of the third quatrain. Keats attributes two qualities to love: (1) it has the ability to transform the world for the lovers ("fairy power"), but of course fairies are not real, and their enchantments are an illusion and (2) love involves human with emotion rather than thought ("I feel" and "unreflecting love"). In this poem, ordinary thoughts are intellectualized and reflected upon with great intensity. This is a compelling quality of Keats's poetry.

### Couplet

In the end, the poet comes to terms that he does lacks the qualities of "unreflecting love" and this revelation leads him to alienation, which is described in the final couplet of lines 13 and 14. It is although he comes back to reality.

Reflecting upon his feelings, which the act of writing this sonnet has involved, Keats achieves some distancing from his own feelings and ordinary life; this distancing enables him to reach a resolution. He thinks about the human solitariness (“I stand alone”) and human insignificance (the implicit contrast between his lone self and “the wide world”). The shore is a point of contact, the threshold between two worlds or conditions, land and sea; so Keats is crossing a threshold, from his desire for fame and love to accepting their unimportance and ceasing to fear and yearn.

Another attribute of romantic poetry is this ability to convey both a dream or imagination with reality. When all of these thoughts of his life ending before he has had the opportunity to achieve his goals, he continues to “think” (kinesthetic image) until he is able to realize that “love and fame” are nothing. He realizes that he is alone in this world, and true love is not possible here for it inevitably ends through separation and/or death. And fame, he realizes, is evanescent as well.

He reflects on time’s inevitable course of the two concerns that the poet holds dearest to him; “love and fame.” Given the universal knowledge of death, these two qualities of love and fame that he values so dearly seem insignificant, and so therefore, into “nothingness do sink.” The poet is left standing on the shores of “the wide world,” at the edge of what is perceived as life, but very close to what one might perceive as the “high romance” or the universe which is discussed in the second quatrain. This perception of man in relationship to the universe and the absolute is once again expounded upon.

It is really in line 6, and in the last two lines of the poem, that one may understand the deepest fear of Keats. It is his own fear of death and his quest to search for the meaning of his own existence. In summation, the first and most pressing quality that Keats would miss would be the opportunity to get all of his ideas down on paper. The title of the poem indicates that Keats did not consider himself immortal through his work. “Huge cloudy symbols of the world” is a desire to understand the unknown or God, which is his second concern. His third concern is narrowed down to the meaning of life. From the abstract he then concentrates on what he would miss if he actually died; love and fame. Love and fame will mean nothing to him since he will vanish from this world with no trace.

## CONCLUSION

Visual image dominates the use of sensuous imagery in the poem. An observation on the use of imagery helps the discussion above strengthens



the evidence that the poem shows Keats's fear of dying young and not able to fulfill himself as a writer and loses his beloved. The poem is a personal confession in many ways. It was inevitable that Keats was preoccupied with death. Keats had witnessed death enough times for this to become a disturbing fear for him. Keats is recognized as one of the most important poets from the Romantic Movement. His fear of falling into obscurity, as stated in his poem proved untrue. In some respects Keats was driven to write all that he could, as if on a sacred mission. Perhaps his fears were an influence in this drive.

The poem deals with three of Keats's primal, constant concerns: love, death, and poetry. The fear of untimely death expressed in the euphemistic title conveys the absolute finality of death, though in a tranquil tone. Given Keats's romantic, adolescent perspective on the subject of love, such a fatalistic outlook on the poetic process is surprising: one would presume that Keats considers himself outside the "mortal coil" and, in a way, he does: seeking poesy as a method of transcending the limits imposed on human by mortality.

Although Keats may not accept his fate, however, his numerous personal experiences of death forced him to acknowledge its existence. Keats's fear is not of death as such, but rather of not fulfilling his poetic destiny, not employing his "teeming brain" to provide transcendental experiences through his poetic descriptions of the beauty of nature, "the night's starr'd face," or of women that "fair creature of an hour."

It is a poem of melancholy and desperation. Though he did think his poems would survive his death, he still felt his contributions were not sufficient and that he would essentially become yet another footnote in the pages of history. This train of thought is emphasized in the all but the last two lines of the poem. He takes what comfort he can in his solidarity by simply saying that love and fame do not matter in the end.

Through words "then on the shore/ of the wide world I stand alone," he points out the loneliness of poet who has his own coast of deep feelings and emotions. The sonnet ends with expression of fear of adversity in love and fame due to sudden death. One may conclude that the fears that so haunted Keats about love and death as in this poem, were in the end, resolved. It is a great poem. Borrowing Keyser's term (1980: 257), both its form and content are identical in beauty.

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